

La Salle University La Salle University Digital Commons

Articles and Conference Papers

Research Based on the Imaginative Representations
of the Vietnam War Collection

1994

Vietnam War Fiction

John S. Baky

La Salle University, Connelly Library

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnam_papers

Recommended Citation

Baky, John S., "Vietnam War Fiction" (1994). *Articles and Conference Papers*. 2.
http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnam_papers/2

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Based on the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Conference Papers by an authorized administrator of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

DRAFT OF ARTICLE CONCERNING THE LITERATURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR
COMMISSIONED BY THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POPULAR CULTURE. THIS DRAFT
TO BE COMBINED WITH AN EQUAL PART WRITTEN BY DR. OWEN GILMAN OF
ST. JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY, PHILADELPHIA, PA - 7 FEBRUARY 1994

I. INTRODUCTION

Flourishing in the media-rich habitat of American life of the past 25 years, the Vietnam War experience has proven exceptionally fertile in begetting multiple caricatures of itself. In support of this assertion, one risks peril not to understand that there exist eight to twelve hundred novels that envision in one way or another the affects of the Vietnam War experience.

The prose fiction representing the American involvement in the Vietnam War is a marvelously appropriate example of just how effectively heuristic popular culture can be when it is applied to a nation intent on assessing the lasting affects from a traumatic historical event. Popular culture devices such as novels, short stories, and personal narratives provide a satchel full of lens of different acutities through which to examine a peoples' understanding of its own actions, as well as a means for that same culture to revise its opinion of itself. Snapping viciously at the graves of its fallen youth, American culture spawned the war in the first place, then cast itself into paroxysms of cultural self-doubt that produced denials of guilt unprecedented for a nation barely two centuries old. Certain populations remain victim still to this array of endless psycho-historical revisioning. Vietnam War fiction continues to propagate like triple canopy jungle.

In the presence of such a mass of material, care must be taken not to inflate expectations. The nobility of an idea is not the determinant of its quality. Thus, the fiction of the Vietnam War proves to be a far more useful device for analyzing the common daily psyche of a people than it proves to be a fount of deathless (or even challenging) "literature." Moreover, the prose fiction of the Vietnam War serves other functions in its role as cultural diary. Fictive treatments of the American experience of the Vietnam War demonstrate with precision just how a complex event may be interpreted by applying creative vision. And secondly, this array of prose fiction illustrates how creative treatments of an event use aesthetic values to reveal

both the fact and emotional essence of traumatic cultural phenomena. All of these means of analysis are inherent strengths of popular culture when they are handled with exactitude, and especially when they are pursued with realistic expectations.

II. Genres

Without exaggeration, it is scarcely possible to overestimate the number of works of prose fiction that draw their fundamental narrative direction and moral compass from the Vietnam War experience. A case may be made that by 1994 one could identify no fewer than 1200 novels that held at their narrative core either a protagonist, a plot device, or a primary setting derived from an overt Vietnam War experience. In fact, one must realize that a thousand novels about any single subject ought to signal an alert. Assuming these facts, one also realizes that this preposterous number is achieved in just shy of a mere two decades from the war itself; one ought to pay special attention to what such superheated cultural reaction reveals about the culture that was responsible for the initial historical event in the first place. The reader must ask what such mass literary production says about America's passion to understand itself through affects cast off by its collective memory. A systematic assessment of the perspectives evident in this quantity of fiction, if one proceeds soberly, does nothing less than demonstrates the evolution of the mutating perceptions of the war experience after the event had actually ended. Treating these fictions as cultural "snapshots" makes it possible to both question and document the sources of developing myths about the war experience. For example, one may examine and measure the impact of the original event by seeing how the experience is presented to the public through imaginative renderings implicit in genre fiction. Thus, using hundreds of examples, one can compare systematically how the post-1975 presentations and perceptions of the war differ qualitatively from pre-1975 material. Attaining such a vantage point over a culture reveals the true utility of popular culture artifacts like novels. More globally, serious literary inquiry can be conducted concerning the elusive distinction between fictional narrative and autobiographical perception. The interrogation of this Coleridge-like chimera that mocks and distorts the reflexive distinctions between narrative memory and interpretive imagination fuels the enduring intellectual vigor of both popular culture and the fictive prose based on the Vietnam War experience.

In view of the above observations, a moment's pause will reveal to all but the most casual readers, that if indeed there 800 to 1200 Vietnam War-related novels, then the literary or historical criteria for inclusion in this group is likely to be, quite frankly, elastic. Nevertheless, like Henry James' loose baggy monsters, this genre is quite real, though frequently unhandsome and generally unruly in groups. For the purposes of this present commentary, the criteria in question include any novel or short

story that bears the war as primary plot element, features a main or essential subsidiary character irretrievably affected by the war, or uses the war or its memory as a formative element of the plot. This is not as like a trash heap category of objects as it might seem, but it is decidedly one piled high with all manner of literary modes - both classical and popular. For instance, in addition to science fiction, a reader of mysteries would discover easily thirty separate titles that are prefigured by some aspect of the Vietnam War. To a large extent, many of these mystery/police procedurals are presented from the point of view of a detective or PI whose persona and way of confronting crime is somehow indelibly determined by his past experience in, as they say, "The Nam." And to an equal extent, the reader will find these genre pieces to be about a criminal or a conspiracy that pivots upon a culprit irretrievably damaged by the war; or by a plot that is dependent on some atrocity or other (usually related to drugs or murder.) There are even a number of examples wherein the two criteria just mentioned exist in one novel - the redemptive Vietnam veteran detective who, in his life, has overcome incredible neurotic obstacles left over from Vietnam, only to confront and overcome the unrepentant lunatic Vietnam veteran criminal who has not. Aficionados of the horror genre would walk away with about twenty candidates, including at least five that have been made into films. As a matter of fact, it is the horror genre that ends up gathering together in one epic struggle the redemptive veteran and the unredeemed maniac. Peerless examples of that magic theater are such unforgettable (and largely unreadable) titles as Bloodfeast, the eponymous masterpiece Slob, Scream by the Misters Skipp and Spector, and Peter Straub's intricate pair of novels Koko and The Throat. What, after all, is a more horror-filled experience than warfare. The relationship between the mechanics and ethos of the horror story and the war story is subtle and interesting. The reader will discover other generic groups of Vietnam War novels clearly identified as romances, psychological thrillers, and more than four score "novels" of pornography.

Though scarcely believable, there are even examples of the genre best identified as Westerns. If the reader were to travel to one of the three major collections of Vietnam War literature in the world, she might read as many as a dozen novels that are set in the American West, and thus serve to juxtapose a sort of cynically embittered American frontiersman with the old attributes of a wary but otherwise Edenic John Wayne-dominated society. In these "westerns," obviously formulaic and written primarily for entertainment purposes, the reader will follow the stereotyped damaged veteran (usually with some good Indian blood in him), returning home as a redemptive hero, when he is forced to rescue sweetheart Marylou from some gingham-shredding villain of dubious capitalist motive. Jests to the contrary, there are legitimate efforts of serious literary intent in this sub-genre as well. Examples of these would be the kind of novel that takes as its driving force the returned native American veteran who finally has restored to him the strength and purity of his

heritage, but only after having had it shamelessly degraded in a white man's war that inevitably betrayed the ideals of American Indian spirit.

Readers sufficiently educated in the formal study of literature before it was yet considered to be "postmodern" will recall the endless prattling of the "Lost Generation" as it pursued endlessly the arduous Grail Quest that was predicted to end in the "Great American Novel." That same reader will recall that particularly in the late 1950's and early 1960's many pundits seemed to believe that the Great American Novel might be immanent. Well, the equivalent to that Grail Quest in the Vietnam War fiction category, if it were to be constructed from the components already to be found in the various existing novels, would look something like the following: A handicapped minority former Marine veteran from Montana, on being returned to his small town, discovers that his family's ranch has been appropriated by a band of urban radical Marxist Feminist eco-terrorist real estate lawyers. In the ensuing epic struggle, the silently lethal Ninja cowpoke (in brimmed 10-gallon green beret) enlists the aid of a deranged, but now-harmless and blind former Viet-cong nurse along with her Navaho shaman husband (himself a paraplegic veteran.) Together, the tiny multi-lingual surrogate family will destroy the evil gang of narco-rapists using nothing but mind-numbing violence and a spectacular ruse having something to do with recycling Agent Orange into inexpensive and wholesome infant formula and a repentant agent of the Branch Davidian.

Now, having adumbrated the breadth and variety of prose fiction growing out of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and having suggested the legitimacy of employing popular culture vehicles like novels as being important for understanding its parent culture; having delineated all that, it is essential to council caution when making indictments against this body of material - literary or otherwise. What may happen, of course, is that the impression may be mistakenly given that low quality writing is all that can be expected from such a conglomeration of fictional modes. If the reader were to come away from this survey with that impression, it would be not only unfortunate, it would be wrong. It is a fact that there are by now scores of novels and short stories that embody impressively creative work of enduring power. The novels alone exhibit literary traits distinguished by points of view bordering on the brilliant. Often complex, sometimes surreal, there are to be found chillingly believable atmospheric creations, unique characterization that in some award-winning instances are remarkably durable, and plotting intricate enough to rival Mr. Dickens. No mistake can be made - the fiction emanating from the Vietnam War experience, voluminous though it is, has among its number at least a score of titles that under any circumstances would be counted as "serious" literature, regardless of the its subject. In the literary mode of the novel alone, the Vietnam War has produced two National

Book Award winners (Going After Cacciato, Paco's Story) and a Pulitzer Prize winner (Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.) Add to this distinguished company novels and stories concerning the war by Graham Greene, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gaddis, Frederick Busch, Madison Smartt Bell, Barry Hannah, and Robert Stone, and one is convinced at least that the Vietnam War experience is considered a worthy theme for serious literary art. In tandem with that first rank of writers, there exists as well a catalogue of serious fiction writers whose books connected to the Vietnam War have earned them a place in the favored gaze of literary critics at the national level - among them Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Clyde Edgerton, Larry Brown, Phillip Caputo, Stephen Wright, Daniel Ford, David James Duncan, Tobias Wolff, Pat Conroy and David Halberstam. Clearly, no apologies need be made for the reputations of these writers and their choice of the Vietnam War experience. It is not the literary quality of these writers that demands caution. On the other hand, the reader of Vietnam War fiction will find it unnewsworthy to learn that the vast majority of the remaining 800 or so titles is less than remarkable in terms of either literary aesthetics or intellectual vigor. A reader striving to be realistically modest in expectation toward the quality of writing in any collection this large must be prepared to employ both humor and a liberal tolerance in order to keep such a variety of styles and concepts in perspective. But, of course, the intellectual importance and analytical utility of popular culture is nourished precisely from this vast field of robust weeds, rather than from those scarce delicate flowers that wave in isolation above the rest.

A good deal of the writing about the war reflects the ethos and demeanor of the era that spawned it. Since the era in American cultural history in which the war fell is one of normally hyperbolic perceptions and, incidentally, not renown for objectivity, it is particularly important that the reader of Vietnam War-related fiction cast a critical eye (honed to a post-hallucinogenic precision) on the sheer numbers of representative titles. As noted, the very number of novels extant entitles Vietnam War fiction to the cultural scrutiny that it deserves. In cultural analysis, popular or otherwise, smoke is as important to understanding an event as flame. The majority of the hundreds and hundreds of Vietnam War novels constitute this tell-tale smoke. Like smoke, indeed, this cascade of prose hangs over the Vietnam experience in thin, if pungent, translucence. Parting the vapor reveals small, gem-toned vistas and occasionally escapeways through the mist. Getting lost in the smoke can easily suffocate the too-idealistic reader.

Like the war itself, the reader would be correct to point out that although it was indeed a lengthy affair - the longest in our history - it was also, if truth be told, a rather small scale conflict. Stop and consider for example, how, and even why, one would wish to defend the almost theatrical national obsession with a war whose 58,000 dead over ten years barely equalled even

the number of Russian soldiers killed simply by poison gas between, 1915 and 1918! Gristly comparisons of this sort fairly leap of the charts. There is drama in the reality that during only the first several hours of the World War I battle of Passchendaele nearly as many allied troops were killed as in the entire ten years of Vietnam. Recall that the USA recorded 116,708 killed in action in its involvement in the Great War - that is twice the number of deaths recorded in Vietnam, but in one-tenth the time! And again, at Antietam, 3600 Americans died in just half a day. Death to this magnitude tempts one, out of sheer horrified respect, to discount the 58,000 war dead of Vietnam as some devilish accident - as only some badly executed military blunder perhaps - surely not a "real" war. And wounded; if you were to factor in the incendiary destruction of Coventry, and the retaliatory firebombing that consumed the living population of Dresden, you might (however reluctantly,) wish to relegate the statistics of the Vietnam War to the status of a mildly interesting footnote to military history. As ghastly as such a comparative diminution of Vietnam's historical significance is, it would be a disservice not to mention how many times such comparative attacks have been launched in hostile public response to the news that Vietnam war literature actually enjoys an international reputation as well as a pedigree of scholarly citations filling more than 100 Ph.D. dissertations. If that last point is granted, and given the ghoulish nature of the comparisons earlier stated, how is it that such a relatively minor historical event reverberates with such intensity the farther away from the event it sails. For example, in support of the explication of the novels in the this specific field of writing, there are to date no fewer than 65 completed Ph.D. dissertations examining facets of the Vietnam War experience as reflected in published fiction. That is not a misstatement; there are at least 65 dissertations addressing some aspect or another of the imaginative representations of the Vietnam War. If the subject of the Vietnam war on film were included in this count, the number would triple. Admittedly, of course, academia is not normally associated with an easy affection toward popular culture. That is to say, the arcane attention brought to bear by doctoral dissertations is notoriously precise and voluminous, and not at all frolicsome. As the reader may discover, dissertations are generally unamusing, yet they are surely exotic beasts. To begin with, any form of literary discourse that has as its prime focus, let's say, The Use of Double Consonant Phrases in the Poetry of Hindu Urine Cults, or the ever-popular Annotated Yiddish-Apache Translation of Babbitt, cannot be counted upon to reflect mainstream public interest in anything; still, understanding the motive resulting in the arduous and costly production of 65 of such treasures in only about a decade is worth examining. All mocking aside, the casual reader will not be pleased to learn that not a few of these deadly serious treatises have been rendered into commercially marketed books; the actual titles of just a few are: Myth, Wound, Accommodation: American Literary Response to the War in Vietnam, Images of Vietnam: Catch-22, New Journalism, and the Postmodern

Imagination, Truth-telling and Narrative Form: Another War and Postmodern Memory, or how about Death and Growth. What the reader is to understand from this short, though representative list, is simply how professionally established is the fictional treatment of the Vietnam War experience.

Anyone searching the literary criticism explicating the fiction of the Vietnam War will be impressed by a recurrent vaguely obsessive use of certain words. Words such as "myth," "memory," "imagination," "vision," "image," "truth," and "narrative," have come to define the intellectual longitudes being superimposed on the geography of the Vietnam War experience for Americans. A large part of the seemingly endless professional fascination with this imagination-driven body of material is its clear role as a sort of free-ranging psychoanalyst in the service of a bewildered public. This body of fiction (along with its critical apparatus) serves as an interpreter of an entire generation's, and later a nation's violently fractured concept of itself. So often observed as to be a commonplace, one may say of the fiction of the war that in its numbers and passion the Vietnam war novel is far less a literary phenomenon than a sociological one.

The recurrent use of the word "myth" in so much of the work treating this war fiction is no accident. The imaginative representation of the Vietnam War, viewed as a nexus of related material, does nothing less than body forth a complete profile of an adolescent nation's narcissistic image of itself. This war fiction continues to draw the international curiosity that it does exactly because its careful focus on richly varied symbols and lurid literary images reveal in animated relief what happens when a good part of an entire national population watches its own intimately evolved ideas of itself - its very own face - become inexorably disfigured and then, after undergoing excruciating debridement, watches again that same disfigured, no longer youthful face transformed into a visage that, although healed after a fashion, now gazes out of cinematic eyes grown flat, cynical, and too-easily teared. When a reader immerses herself in the fiction of the Vietnam War, without regard to literary quality, period, or ideological cast, she will find that it can reproduce a sensational demonstration of a nation's vision of itself refracted, refocused, and reformed in a space of time that used to require a full century of historical perspective. In this case, though, start-to-finish, this kaleidoscopic, electronically propagated war underwent the same cultural autopsy in fewer than twenty years. Such speeds of light render fact irrelevant; image is everything. To a certain extent, this kind of dramatic compression (art) is precisely what the function of myth is. Though for the first time in history one can witness in one sitting the genesis, epic struggle, dreadful death, and ritual rebirth of a single nation via its mythic categories of self-esteem. There are virtually countless titles of novels and short stories using the Vietnam War as a central metaphor that document a nation's myths as they are destroyed and recast. The diligent reader of novels about the Vietnam experience will learn that, as

in the case of myth in its age-old role as cultural road map, myth is a metaphorical expression - usually narrative in form - that contains an individual's or group's image of itself situated in history. Myths are creative simplifications of complex cultural and historical realities. Now, myths may often distort or conceal, but these stories are nevertheless always true in the sense that they express deeply held beliefs. Myth deals in truths rather than facts. Myth can thus have a powerful role in compelling a people to defy rational limits and thus change facts in order to preserve its own preferred image of itself. The imaginative representations of the Vietnam War in all its fictive variety treats the war experience as an intersection of belief and value expressed as metaphor. Or, frequently enough, expressed perhaps through overt characterization and not-so-subtle dialogic conversations. A novel such as The Thirteenth Valley employs all these devices at once, demonstrating the author's sense that the war is profoundly mythopoeic. If the reader systematically surveys the rich variety of literary expression illuminating the war experience, she will witness first-hand how the Vietnam War and its metaphors replicates America's mythic existence. She would see take place in piece after piece a desperate search for a pattern of events, beliefs, or consequences that will make the war somehow intelligible. What the reading public still seeks is a recognizable pattern of meaning that will somehow make the whole savage effort reasonable, if not noble. Such searches produce a nation's conscience. This collective imagination of the Vietnam war is perhaps best defined by a scholar named M. Gilbert Porter when he says that

"The myth of American innocence, moral righteousness, and idealistic motivation in warfare was sustained, with occasional lapses, in both world wars and in the Korean conflict by most participants, commentators, and the American public. The mythical superstructure collapsed in Vietnam, however, amid unprecedented human and historical complexities."

In the fiction of the Vietnam war experience, the reader finds ample evidence to prove the uncanny truth, if not the empirical of facts that quotation.

III. Chronologies

The fictive treatment of American involvement in the Vietnam War burgeoned overheatedly after about 1982; prior to that year, prose fiction born of a Vietnam War experience saw the light of publication at a rate far more modest than might be expected. Modest, that is, when one considers that the central agon of these novels and short stories was generated by an historical event of sufficient magnitude to occasionally threaten the stability of the most powerful nation on Earth.

Chronologically convenient, this arbitrary 1982 division of commercial publishing activity constitutes one of the two primary framing devices commonly employed to assess the "literary" output of prose fiction representing the Vietnam War. The year 1982 stands as no mystical cipher in and of itself to justify its use as a watershed date; nor is it a year in which novels of extraordinary merit were published. 1982 seems to take its importance as a framing device by virtue of its position as marker for the formal dedication in Washington, D.C. of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Real, if whimsically enough, this event marked in unexpectedly dramatic fashion the "permission" to mourn and lament in public an experience that up until that year threatened to become a societal taboo of mythic strength. The flood of prose fiction and personal narratives that tumbled forth into the main stream of popular culture was astonishing. Incredibly, by only 1988, one could physically verify 400 commercially published novels depicting Americans fighting in Vietnam. When novels dealing with the war in less direct ways were added, that number raced skyward. As of today, fictive pieces of various lengths and modes depicting the war's consequences are virtually uncountable.

But to continue, the other convenient framing device that may be employed to schematize the fictive product of the Vietnam War experience is the ageless critical distinction between fictive narrative that is selfconsciously "made up" for intentional creative expression, in contrast to the other sort of fictive discourse that unselfconsciously straddles the razor's edge of **Imagination and Memory**. Quite important from a theoretical stance, as well as from a literary historical vantage, these two framing devices (chronological, psychological) are not recklessly reductive.

Another way to measure this body of fiction is to consider the year 1961 as an historically defensible boundary date for its beginning. In support of this beginning date, the Library of Congress has devised the standard subject entry of **"VIETNAMESE CONFLICT, 1961-1975 --FICTION"** to identify all fictive prose dealing with the war. Included in this official subject designation are novels, short stories, and anthologies of either or both. Libraries maintaining Special Collections or rare book and manuscript collections that include unpublished fiction manuscripts, single stories published as off-prints, and prose fiction pieces of varying lengths are all to be found under this official Library of Congress heading. The reader engaged in research of the fictive dimension of the Vietnam War as an element of American popular culture should at least begin with that subject heading when using electronic databases on both CD-ROM and online. These latter two resources may offer many other search terms in addition to those devised by the Library of Congress.

Within the parameters set forth above, the reader may expect to

find about 1,200 novels that have at their center Americans showing the scarring affects of the Vietnam War experience. This wide array of novels holds in common the Vietnam War experience in its dual role as structural element and motive force. Aside from those shared characteristics, the reader may expect to find this variety of novels representing almost as many genres of fiction as exist. Once this richness of linguistic expression, literary style, and imaginative plotting is accepted, the only reliable distinction the reader may depend on is whether the fiction depends for its point of view on a character or plot that:

- 1.) depicts Americans actually fighting in the war;
- 2.) one in which the characters and/or plots operate in some fictive relation to war as a past event or as a flashback, or
- 3.) one in which the war stands as stern Father of some conflict that irrevocably possesses a character down to the present and even into the future.

Indeed, anyone wishing to physically locate this fiction about the Vietnam War (particularly if it is out-of-print, which the vast majority of the 1200 already are,) one must rely on such broad divisions as Americans fighting in the war, as opposed to works that only employ the war as an intrinsic narrative device or set of recurring plot/character referents. It is no casual coincidence that this very same distinguishing characteristic of combatant or non-combatant is exactly what defines the emphases of the important library research collections of this fiction at the national level.

Like other bodies of fiction that have developed in reaction to some ideological struggle, the fiction about the Vietnam War tends to follow discreet chronological stages of identity in terms of its style, subject treatment, and ideological sophistication. Conveniently enough for survey purposes, the fiction of the Vietnam experience may be viewed as having three broad stages of such development following the loosely chronological periods below:

- 1.) The first period of war writing can be said to begin about 1965/66 offering titles like Robin Moore's Green Berets, Irwin R. Blacker's Search and Destroy (also published in Britain,) Smith Hempstone's A Tract of Time, Scott C. S. Stone's Coasts of War, and the now applauded LBJ Brigade written by William Wilson. This period runs through about 1975/76 and is characterized more than anything else by a portrayal of Americans actually engaged in fighting the Vietnam War. The reader will be struck by a kind of first-person immediacy in much of the writing. These early novels tend to be obvious autobiographical narratives of writers who were also combat veterans of the war. Stylistically, these novels and short stories are straightforward relations of one character's experiences in the war. The plots

conform to a standard narrative pattern of conflict-climax-denouement. Without exception, this fiction is not experimental or innovative. In general, this period of writing may be described ideologically as one portraying American citizens consenting to fight a just war believed to be in behalf of defenseless victims of world communism. The vicious nature of guerrilla warfare waged in the midst of a hellish sub-tropical environment reveals the narrator quickly sinking into a despairing state of mind. The protagonist's depth of affliction under such hyperbolically brutal conditions is compounded by his perception that his life rests in the amoral and callous hands of a naive or incompetent military bureaucracy. The fictive prose extant from this period is slavish in its conformity to such a design.

2.) The second rough period of war writing may be said to run from about 1977/78 to about 1988, with the bulk of it being published (if not actually written) between about 1984 and 1988. Recognizable by such titles as Larry Heinemann's Close Quarters, Deer Hunter (published as a novel adapted from the filmscript after the film was released,) Winston Groom's Better Times than These, Tim O'Brien's award winning Going after Cacciato, John Cassidy's A Station in the Delta, Gustav Hasford's Short-Timers (from which was adapted the film Full Metal Jacket,) the Japanese writer Takeshi Kaiko's Into a Black Sun, Charles Nelson's Boy who Picked the Bullets Up, Stephen Wright's Meditations in Green, and many others even less known but worthy of attention today, this period is identifiable by its propensity for vitriolic rage directed at the sources of political expedience that appear to keep good and decent citizen soldiers mired hopelessly in the tragically unwinnable combat of a foreign civil war. This period of writing marks a trend that emphasizes the quagmire-like nature of a conflict that is not simplistically evil in its origins. This period is perhaps the one whose body of writing has come to represent what some observers have called the Vietnam War "genre." The term "genre" should be used advisedly, though. A coldly analytical appraisal of the 270 or so titles included in this period would justify a well-advised reluctance on the part of any trained reader to dignify this body of writing with the criteria normally reserved to the formal term "genre." At best, this writing may be considered a sub-species of the generally recognized genre of "war fiction" or larger "action/adventure." In any case, this 1976-88 period continues the earlier trend of writing that employed thinly disguised autobiography as the narrative structure for the novel. What differentiates this group of works from its precursors is a noticeable sophistication on the part of the writer to transform the earlier fictive modes into more "literary" modes of expression sometimes recognizable as the *bildungsroman*, with some curt nods to the *roman a clef*, and all aimed at the *realpolitik* of the deteriorating chaos of civil strife occurring in the United States of that time, and thus providing a now-familiar backdrop in many many novels of the period. So, this second broad group of fictive writings is characterized by a story line that depicts the narrator's war

experience, but one expressed in progressively more sophisticated modes of expression, and expressed in unrelentingly bitter tones delivered with sharply selfconscious political cynicism.

This is the period of writing that may be identified as the first commercial blossoming of the writing about the Vietnam experience. For the first time, the public is offered war writing that not only intends to tell a narrator's story and thereby alert the American public to what was perpetrated in its name, but it is war writing that begins to develop a dimension that is unabashedly committed to purposes of reader entertainment. In fact, by the mid-1980's, the twin drugs of action/adventure energize at least nine different paperback war series. Each having as its setting and plot the Vietnam War. Wholly formulaic in structure and style, and bearing otherwise cartoonish titles such as **Black Eagles** (14 titles), **Saigon Commandos** (14 titles,) **Spring Blade** (6 titles,) and **Night Fighters** (3 titles.) Each of these formulaic escapist serials issue separate titles from as few as two to as many as 17 novels (**Vietnam:ground zero.**) "Pulp fiction" or "men's action/adventure series" are terms most descriptive of this category of writing. Mindlessly jingoistic, much of this fiction is identical to the typical men's magazine posturing common to the kind of war fiction that has accompanied every major conflict and, predictably enough, along with it comes a suitably Neanderthal ethos and cesspool vocabulary. Such writing targets an adolescent and probably non-combatant civilian male audience. Needless to say, understanding the Vietnam War experience will not be enhanced by reading these pulp series. But, the reader interested in the intellectual history of the public perception of the details of the war experience ought to make a sure appraisal of this distinctive category of writing. Its very existence and continued commercial success gestures toward a willingness on the part of the adult population to view what was in actuality a grotesquely destructive and hyperviolent event, as a trivialized affect of formulaic adventure fiction, thus managing to reduce its hyperviolence to mere voyeuristic entertainment. Like prime time television, it is this leveling effect of certain categories of popular culture that is both its strength and its weakness. The speed with which the memory of actual and virulent human destruction is transformed into superficial entertainment is surely illuminating of a peoples' sense of reality. Additionally, these sorts of ill-informed pastiches of an historical event are exactly those that spawn a good many of the misconceptions that have come to cloak the Vietnam War. From the pulp fiction is established the public acceptance of many folkloric "truths." Truths telling of incurable venereal diseases suffered by GI's, turn-coat GI's who became "white Cong" running with the Viet Cong, the supposedly routine murder of Vietnamese by throwing them out of helicopters, and the common belief that returning American soldiers were routinely spat upon by other American citizens in American airports.

Finally, this large middle period of fictive writing marks a far

more significant tendency for the more serious writers of that time to begin actively appropriating the Vietnam War experience as a tendentious rhetorical vehicle of great power. Many of these novels assumed the aspect of docile mules on which were hoisted mercilessly heavy loads of ideological baggage together with the rhetorical structures that would underpin political agendas far into the 1990's. Similarly freighted, the last general period of writing may be understood to occupy the late 1980's through at least the mid-1990's. At this junction, a caution should be voiced. The careful reader will recall that common to most attempts at delineating stylistic periods one often encounters unavoidable overlap among the groups of works. Be aware that it occurs here as well.

3. The importance of this last period of writing is to be found in its tell-tale selfconsciousness. The writers of much of the fiction seem intent on fashioning interpretive tools with which the American public can re-examine its own collective image as reflected in the prose mirrors held up by a set of writers. This is the period of writing about the war that is most likely to be identified as "revisionist." Now, "revisionist" ought to be a tag that is understood by the present-day reader as one capable of focusing its rhetorical lens in opposite directions - depending upon which end of the political spectrum the writer and his perceived audience seems to be located. Here is located much of the fiction that valorizes the politically charged issue of POW-MIA disposition; questions the evolving national attitude exhibited toward veterans with PTSD; interrogates the culpability of having allowed American soldiers to be exposed to toxic chemicals like Agent Orange during a carefully orchestrated campaign to alter the fundamental ecology of an entire region of the planet; and here abound the unreconciled issues of race, class, and gender as they are played out against the overt political corruption (real and imagined) of no fewer than three Presidential administrations. Last, but certainly not least, it is in this last open-ended period of writing that the reader encounters those aggregate issues of national self-interest lately identified as the dreaded "VIETNAM SYNDROME." Civilian Iraqis may perhaps speak with the most authority as to whether the Vietnam war has had any long-term consequential affect on the American public. The VIETNAM SYNDROME is a profoundly mythopoeic cultural construction, and it is really what most of the writing about the Vietnam war ends up buttressing or embellishing from the late 1980's to the present. One may count it no exaggeration to say that a great deal of the present-day fictive writing about the Vietnam experience is not about the war itself at all. Instead, it seems to be about how the American public judges itself when redemption is as much an alternative as guilt. Current novels about the Vietnam War by their very accommodation of this intellectual tendency to see one thing symbolically for another - this sort of objective correlative for the American psyche - is the period of writing that is by far the most interesting. It is within this period of writing that the war is often treated metaphorically; and using the war experience as

trope is not the only experimental twist that occurs. There exist fine examples of genuinely innovative writing to be found in this period of war writing. Fiction like Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, Bruce McAllistair, Paco's Story by Larry Heinemann, Robert Olen Butler's Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, In the Fields of Fire anthologizes Sci Fi stories, a novel of sequels and prequels about life in the rear areas entitled REMF Diary et al. written by David A. Willson, all these test the bounds of literary experience in the service of popular culture. The Vietnam War story gets appropriated by science fiction, is assimilated by large careful melodramas (Massachusetts by Nancy Zaroulis, Slow Poison by Sheila Bosworth, Indocine by Christie Dickason,) and "veteran status" becomes an absolutely essential "credential" for protagonists or plots in political novels, not to mention so-called high end mystery/detective novels (e.g. most all of James Lee Burke, some of Faye Kellerman, Ed McBain, and T. Jefferson Parker, Nelson Demille, et al.). At its present rate of birth, fiction drawing its balance and complexion from the Vietnam War Experience seems destined to supplant the older American "Immigrant-Makes-Good" motif that runs strongly through the popular culture of the American public from Dreiser to Tom Wolfe. Horatio Alger marches and slogs through the Vietnam war. By the mid-1990's the Alger metaphor is still to be found, but in camouflage so dense that one can hardly see him against the past - just like America, then and now.

If one were forced to explain why this latter period of writing about the Vietnam War is so interesting in its chimerical sort of way, one would have to respond with the word irony. The Vietnam War has become a complex trope for things not being what they seem in American life. And, more often than not, the figure chosen to embody this transformation is the American boy who enters one end of a historical tunnel in one state of being and is vomited forth at the other end - disoriented, unhealed, cynical, and mean. To be sure, it is equally ironic that the farther removed from the original event one travels, the more "current" the myriad implications of the Vietnam experience appear to become for democracies like the United States. It seems that democracies tend to harbor people who feel compelled to recreate public images of themselves - apparently as evidence of their freedom. Writers from that setting make sure that the public sees in this post-Vietnam era's revisioning of the Vietnam War the once heroic home-grown sports star as fighter pilot, the rags-to-riches black enlisted man now leading his white platoon through impossible ordeals into safety, triage nurses become foul-mouthed (though always pert) angels, the insensitive careerist general (read as corporate martinet) is transformed into a self-sacrificing father figure simply by being in the presence of his noble, decent, citizen soldier American boys. All these interchangeables are to be found in much of the current fiction purporting to be about the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, such an opportunity for a culture to re-examine itself so systematically is, after all, the value of popular culture in the

first place. Popular culture is that rear intersection of perceptions that values entertainment, documentary narrative, and the imaginative representation of historical memory all as useful evidence. The systematic recollection of the Vietnam experience ends up being a means to choose future actions, if possible, free of avoidable blunders. A solution to the present lethal morass in Bosnia will tell how well past lessons work in changing future events.

IV. Point of View

There is another way to conceptualize the large fictive output of the years 1965 to the present. It corresponds to the above three divisions, but is founded instead on the protagonist's experiential war credentials. Employing this schema, one can hold in mind the following:

- 1.) Fiction from c.1965-75 is written largely by authors who were combat veterans of the war; or who had first-hand experience with similar traumatic situations by virtue of being journalists, diplomatic or intellectual careerists (e.g. pundits); or by family members who had fallen victim to some tragic fallout of the actual war. Simply put, this first period is one voiced by "insiders." A sense of I-Was-There-So-Don't-Question-My-Story pervades much of this writing. There is little tolerance for the narratives of civilians, war protesters, minorities, or women - regardless of whether they, too, might have been participants or victims.
- 2.) Fiction writing from c.1975-85 is conspicuous for its growing mix of "Insider" observers of one kind or another, but now with an added pool of author-narrators drawn from the ranks of war protestor/activists (both civilian and military), career politicians having been in power at the time and thus having reputational stakes in the portrayal of the war, and a complex combination of authors who felt damaged or violated enough by the war to be compelled to make public comments on its affects. This second category of narrator/protagonist may be labeled as "Outsiders." Their fictional modes are mostly veiled autobiography or perhaps a rarified form of punditry meant to satisfy the intellectual resentments of writers who came almost exclusively from a precise generation of American citizens - The Baby Boomers. The very same folks who massaged their collective memories until - *mirabile dictu* - they gave breath to the Vietnam Syndrome. Again, simply put, this second period is one best described as being created by the former combatant "Insiders" in tandem with the generally non-combatant "Outsiders." Importantly, though, what the two groups have in common is a generational commitment and proximity to the playing out of the Vietnam War itself in their own lifetime.
3. Fiction writing of last period, commencing in the late 1980's and running through the present, is truly a broth of

shoes. It is a robust if gamey stew of every variety of authorial point of view, participant credentials (real or contrived), ulterior ideological agendas, and - as the reader should be quick to recall - a shameless commitment to using the war experience as a source of entertainment, sometimes even to the bizarre extremity of romantic comedy. Simply put, this last period is the one best described as being created by "Disinterested Outsiders." This cohort of writers claim the Vietnam War experience as fit subject for their "Disinterested" observations about this war, its conduct, its moral implications for a post-war nation, and every other conceivable ax offered up for grinding.

The reader pursuing a systematic examination of the body of fictive writing referred to as Vietnam war fiction will find that the tripartite schematic (Insiders / Insiders-Outsiders/ Disinterested Outsiders) serves as a map when it comes to actually locating places where the reader might expect to physically read the examples of the fiction in question.

V. Resources

Research resources concerning the Vietnam War divide into those materials of a documentary/historical nature and those of an imaginative/fictive nature. There are small collections of both categories scattered throughout the USA, mostly at universities. However, the important collections are few, and the indispensable collections for fiction number but three.

In the Imaginative/Fictive category the reader has only three choices of institutional collections. The reader wishing to examine and read nearly every title extant of fiction depicting American fighting in the Vietnam War, may visit the The Vietnam War Literature Collection housed at the Colorado State University at Fort Collins, Colorado. It is open to the public by appointment, and there is no charge to the user.

The reader wishing to examine or read any of about 10,000 items of an imaginative nature including novels, short stories, poetry, film, music, photography, graphic art, software, and games should approach The Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The La Salle University Collection includes virtually every item that exists in the Colorado State collection, but in addition to those, La Salle holds a total of 1200 novels related to the war, 600 films, and hundreds upon hundreds of individual poems, short stories, and graphic art. Being acquired at a growing rate are individual author archives placed on deposit by the writer himself.

These two national collections are the most extensive in the world of imaginative representations of the Vietnam War. They are distinctly different. Before launching comparisons, though,

it is important to know that the two mature scholarly resources described here are in no way competitive for potential users, though they are in some specific ways mutually exclusive of certain kinds of research.

The essential differences that distinguish the **La Salle University Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War** from the **Colorado State Collection** are ones of intent and scope.

A.) Perhaps the most accurate description of the Colorado State University Vietnam War Literature Collection is to be found quoted in the Preface to the 2nd edition (NJ:Scarecrow Pr., 1988) of John Newman's seminal **Vietnam War Literature: an annotated bibliography of imaginative Works about Americans Fighting in Vietnam.** This important annotated record of some of the fiction written about the war

"... is based primarily on the Vietnam War Literature at Colorado State University. That collection was begun in 1975 after a survey of large research libraries revealed that none had a collection of fiction, poetry, drama and other creative works about the Vietnam War. The collection is now much larger than the 226 items that were listed six years ago. Its holdings, catalogs and databases are a resource for scholars, writers, dealers and others interested in the literature. There is no nonfiction material. Some personal narratives, diaries and so-called 'nonfiction novels' have much to say about the war, but they are not in this guide to purely creative works. The locale is Vietnam, but there are other settings during the war including Laos, Cambodia and imaginary countries clearly meant to represent Vietnam. There is nothing here that focuses only on the French in Indochina, nor are there any of the fantastic postwar adventures to rescue POWs or destroy the Southeast Asian drug trade. Much of the war protest literature refers to Vietnam, but it is included only if it is set there. Comic books and audio-visual media are excluded as a practical matter.

The Vietnam veteran is a popular character in modern American fiction, and many books about veterans have preliminary chapters or flashbacks set in Vietnam. The practice here is to include novels in which the Vietnam segment is substantial enough to tell its own story and is also important to the main plot.

The essential goal has been to present works that describe the Vietnam War as it was experienced firsthand by relatively few people and watched on television by a great many more." pp. xi-xii.

B. In contrast to the Colorado collection, the intent of the La Salle collection is to provide a resource that allows the

reader to discover in an expansive literature precisely where certain persistent images, recurring ideological conceptions, and factual distortions concerning the Vietnam experience originate. The idea being, once the origin of a certain concept is located, it will be possible for the reader to understand how that original distortion has grown into the elaborate monstrosities of imagination that eventually recur in printed fiction, film, TV, music, and graphic art. For instance, why does the Rambo figure possess the cultural power and ideological durability that it clearly does; or by what cultural transference does the dark and varied iconography of the "Green Beret" replace and revision that of John Wayne. Teasing apart the complexities of these two mythopoeic transformations has produced at least five score doctoral dissertations and published essays targeting academic audiences. The natural evolution of many of these imaginative representations of the war are capable of mutating into logical absurdities of grotesque aspect and, as likely as not, end up by being the most vivid after-image left imprinted on the novel-reading public. It is by now a truism that the public understands "history" according to what it already believes (or wants to believe), rather than by relying on sober authorities analyzing events through a lens illuminated by the harsh light of data and carefully exfoliated narratives. The intent of the **La Salle University Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection** is to make it possible for those willing to look, to see just how it is that history appears more about how an event is remembered and thus imagined, than it is about the factually defined event itself.

The scope of the La Salle Collection is at least as wide as its intent. A sense of how the multi-media scope illuminates the intent is perhaps best described in the official description of the **Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection**. It says:

The **IMAGINATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VIETNAM WAR COLLECTION** provides thousands of texts that would reveal to a reader how - via comparative readings - a "non-fiction" narrative becomes eventually fictive (and vice versa) as its narrator refracts the recalled "event" through the bifocal lens of his imagination and his memory. Readers who have been thus exposed are left with the distinct suspicion, all disclaimers to the contrary, that a narrator's ability to reconstruct objective reality out of emotion-charged data is ultimately doomed to unreliability. This comparative approach does not contend that the fictions in question are lies or deceptions themselves. They are not. It does, however, demonstrate that "truth" is wondrously protean. In short, this use of the La Salle Collection teaches that narrative certitude via fictive texts is by necessity never the pure and simple truth that entire intellectual generations like the Southern Agrarians used to seek as if it were the very Grail itself.

This spectacular capacity to monitor the transformation of texts

through various evolving narrative modes in real time using actual examples is one of the true and unique strengths of a research collection constructed of mass culture artifacts.

Now, having displayed the profile of what is contained in the **Colorado State University Vietnam War Literature Collection**, and followed that description with the above profile of **La Salle's Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection**, it should be clearer to the prospective researcher which one is most likely to meet certain research needs. To summarize, if one wishes to examine about 600 examples of fictive prose depicting Americans fighting in Vietnam and its environs, examine about an equal number of short stories anthologized or alone, examine about 100 books or anthologies of poetry, and examine about 40 examples of dramatic productions, then one should travel to the Colorado State University Collection. Understand, though, that The Colorado State University Collection focuses only on Americans fighting in Vietnam. It is important to remember that the Colorado State Collection is meant by design to be very precise in its focus. It should be noted as well that the Colorado State Collection is very rich in unpublished manuscripts that have been deposited with it founder, John Newman. This manuscript material is largely uncatalogued and access to the unpublished material is subject to tight restrictions imposed either by the authors or Newman or both.

What the prospective reader will not find in the Colorado State University Collection is extensive secondary resources that analyze or contextualize the fictive works held there; nor will be found titles of poetry, novels, or drama that clearly evidence the place the Vietnam war has come to occupy in the evolving socio-historical settings of contemporary American culture best represented by film, music, and graphic media. For those perspectives on the Vietnam war one must travel to La Salle's Collection. If one is interested in seeing how a novel written by a veteran during the war years has been transmuted into an eventual film version via a trail of ever-changing rewrites, paperback issues, screenplay versions, and so on, then one is best advised to come to La Salle. If one wishes to see how contemporary writers are "imagining" the consequences of the war on contemporary American society, or to study the treatment of the Vietnam war as a long-term cultural determinant as presented in, say, 85 doctoral dissertations than - again - one should ntravel to La Salle. As a rule of thumb, the researcher should keep in mind that nearly all of the titles available in the CSU Collection are also held in the La Salle Collection, however, many of the catalogued items in the La Salle Collection are not available in the CSU Collection; novels, alone, stand at about 1200. Researchers should mark carefully that the **La Salle Collection** encompasses the added dimensions of ciema and graphic art through its ownership of 600 films and plays as well as through its 300 pieces of graphic art.

C. The reader contemplating serious inquiry into what has become

known as "Vietnam War Literature" should be aware that there is one additional collection of resources to be taken into account. Beside the two great collections of the fictive or imaginative representation of the war described above, there is **The John M. Echols Collection** at Cornell University. This collection offers tens of thousands of volumes of primary resources including monographs published in North and South Vietnam and Laos (both government and private sector.) The importance of the Echols Collection is its unique strength in holdings written in Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, and French. A reader seeking fictive material written in non-English languages is wise to inquire of the Echols Collection at Cornell. The Echols Collection does not approach in size or strength the La Salle University Collection in terms of contemporary fiction, film, or other imaginative formats. The Echols Collection is in the process of having segments of its holdings made available to the public on microfilm. The first microfilmed section is entitled **The John M. Echols Collection - Selections on the Vietnam War** (about 30,000 volumes so far,) and is available through University Microfilms, Inc.